

Transfeminism: An Argument for Intersectionality

Originally, the feminist movement arose in opposition of the patriarchal society that oppressed women and perpetuated the social hierarchy that granted men additional rights. As time went on, feminist views diversified, and different branches of feminism began to take form. Naturally, these separate branches arose from conflicting perspectives on a myriad of issues. Recently, the issue at the fore front of the feminist movement is the place of trans people in women's organizations and feminist spaces. Certain feminist platforms have taken an intersectional approach by seeking to include women from a diverse set of backgrounds, including transwomen and transmen, and others have gone in the opposite direction by developing radical and cisgender feminist platforms. **By looking at a handful of arguments made for intersectionality in feminist theory, legal studies, and case studies, this paper will show that the acceptance of trans people into the feminist movement, including feminist spaces and women's organizations, will further the trans community and feminist community's agendas of dissolving the social hierarchy that oppresses them both.**

Since women have begun organizing to address the common injustices they face in society, feminist spaces have arisen correspondingly. "Transgender and Feminist Alliances in Contemporary U.K. Feminist Politics", written by Deborah M. Withers, discusses how feminist spaces work to serve the feminist agenda, and outlines the debate on the trans community's place in these spaces. Feminist spaces, found in actual physical spaces and online, serve as a place "for women to come together, share experiences, and build confidence away from male-dominated culture and space" (Withers, 9). As one could imagine, these spaces are essential to achieving feminism's objective of equal rights for women due to the innovation that fosters within them, and feminist spaces that prohibit trans people lack the diversity that drives this innovation.

The exclusion of trans people can be seen in certain factions of the feminist movement. Radical feminist groups, such as the London Feminist Network, discount transwomen and transmen from their events due to the inconsistency between their gender and sex by declaring their feminist spaces “women-only” (Withers, 3). It is clear as to why the trans community, especially transwomen, would take offense to this as transwomen *are* women and should not be precluded from spaces proclaimed as women-only. Withers opposes the stance of radical feminist groups like this, and instead, advocates for polytrans-friendly spaces as they are “more inclusive in scope than a women-only space because it accounts for various modes of gendered experience” (Withers, 5). Polytrans-friendly spaces take an intersectional approach by recognizing that women come from a multitude of backgrounds and that this diversity is actually advantageous. Conversely, by naming feminist spaces women-only, radical and cisgender feminists are perpetuating the traditional social hierarchy their very movement opposes.

As mentioned earlier, feminist spaces can not only be found in physical spaces, but online as well. The F-Word, an online forum common among feminists in the UK, provides a politically neutral space for all feminist voices whether they be a transgender feminist, women of color feminist, or radical feminist. In March 2008, Helen G., a transgendered feminist, began writing on the F-Word about transfeminism and the political divide between the trans and feminist communities (Withers, 6). Unfortunately, Helen received a wave of transphobic harassment from some of her readers because they felt that her transgender identity should prevent her from contributing to the discussion. The editor of the F-Word, Jess McCabe, was largely surprised by this as “features by men are almost entirely met by a wave of positive comments” (Withers, 6). This divide in the acceptance of men into feminist dialogue and the acceptance of trans people into feminist dialogue highlights how radical feminists are failing to progress with the rest of the

feminist movement. Instead, they are maintaining the power dynamics of the patriarchal society they originally aimed to dissolve.

The benefits of polytrans-friendly spaces and the downfalls of radical feminism that are presented by Withers help to shape the argument for an intersectional approach that appreciates and recognizes the benefits of diverse perspectives. Furthermore, by being considerate and accepting of these diverse perspectives, including those of trans people, feminism can continue toward reaching their goal of dissolving the social hierarchy that oppresses women of all backgrounds. As the divide between the trans and feminist communities seems more apparent than ever, it is important to seek out the opinions of those directly involved in the conflict.

Krista Scott-Dixon gathers opinions from MTF (male-to-female) and FTM (female-to-male) trans people in her article “TransForming Politics.” Dixon begins by pointing out the economic, social, and legal injustices that trans people have organized against, and how they have “not only drawn on feminist work in these areas but have added new insights and dimensions” (Dixon, 21). Here, Dixon is imagining the potential symbiotic relationship that could develop between the trans and feminist communities through their shared goals. The trans community is battling injustices similar to those that feminists have already conquered or are continuing to battle, and not only are they employing strategies drawn from the feminist movement, they are making these strategies more robust by adding new dimensions to them. From this, it is clear that these two communities can build off each other in innovative and constructive ways by adhering to the vast diversity that lies within them.

Trans individuals help the progression of feminism by offering their unique and diverse perspectives on varying issues. FTM, Joshua Goldberg, founder of three trans organizations, presents an interesting take on the rift between the trans and feminist movements. He advocates

that feminism should “Build movements rooted in principled solidarity, shared values and goals, rather than engaging in hurtful and wasteful battles about who is a ‘real’ woman or trans person” (Dixon, 45). Goldberg is arguing against the endless debate of “who gets to be a woman”, an ever-present argument between trans people and certain factions of feminism, and proposing that instead, the two sides should accept one another based on the common injustices they’ve faced and values they share. By doing so, they could eliminate the oppression that has presented them with adversity in a much more efficient manner, and begin shaping a world in which there is no favoritism between genders.

In some circumstances, opposition will propel a movement forward rather than take away from its progress. MTF activist, Lynette Dubois, believes that “the current struggles for acceptance by trans individuals reinvigorate, rather than detract from, the women’s movement” (Dixon, 45). Dubois is asserting that the dissent coming from the trans community challenges the feminist movement by making them “address both new and familiar social challenges” (Dixon, 45). Productive and progressive conversations arise in feminist movements from trans people challenging the norms that feminism was built on. In this way, feminism is already benefiting from the trans movement, and therefore should respect the diversity that the trans community brings, rather than shy away from it.

Although some see the divide between the trans and feminist movements as too great to mend, others are capable of recognizing that in the big picture, these two movements are fighting for the same issue, equality. Dixon concludes this text with a meaningful quote from Kyle Scanlon, a Toronto social worker whose clientele primarily consists of street-active trans women and sex workers. He says, “trans feminism shouldn’t be perceived as an oxymoron, but as a redundancy” (Dixon, 45). Scanlon couldn’t have put it better. With this quote, he perfectly

conveys how the term “transfeminism” shouldn’t be seen as contradictory, but rather as an obvious comparison between two groups that strive for equality. There will always be controversy within a large group as this is hard to avoid when one is organizing around the beliefs of many. The feminist and trans movements are no different. They have undeniable differences and these must be respected because without them, progress wouldn’t occur. By coming together, the trans and feminist movements could learn through their disparities and fix the mistakes that have prevented them from achieving their objectives.

Women’s organizations are not excluded from groups that have refused membership to transwomen due to the inconsistency between their sex and gender. Vancouver Rape Relief and Women’s Shelter, founded in 1972, has long been one of the most admired women’s organizations as it was one of the original places for female victims of rape to seek help. However, since the 1990s, the Rape Relief center has struggled to welcome transwomen with open arms. “Feminist Embattlement on the Field of Trans”, written by Patricia Elliot, argues for the acceptance of transwomen into women’s organizations, such as Rape Relief, by discussing the injustices faced by Kimberly Nixon, a transwoman from Vancouver.

In 1990, Kimberly Nixon applied for a position as a counselor at the Vancouver Rape Relief center but was ultimately denied the job on the basis that she wasn’t born a woman (Elliot, 19). Nixon filed a law suit against the Rape Relief center, and although there were times when it looked like she might win, the case was lost, and Nixon was not allowed to begin training as a counselor (Elliot, 23). Elliot believes that this “case assumes a wider symbolic value for the meaning and self-understanding of feminism as it questions the goals of inclusivity and support for sexual minorities that many feminists deem indispensable to the movement” (Elliot, 19). Here, Elliot touches on the importance of this case as it relates to intersectional feminism.

Moreover, by acknowledging diversity's contribution, as Elliot does, the feminist movement can take a more holistic, yet precise, course of action in tackling the patriarchal hierarchy that has adversely affected all women.

While some women's organizations maintain an anti-trans policy, many others welcome the diversity that trans people provide. For instance, although the Vancouver Rape Relief center persists in being a women-only space, organizations like Vancouver's WAVAW Rape Crisis Centre are welcoming of trans women and see the intrinsic value they bring to the feminist movement. Geraldine Glattstein, Director of WAVAW, "states 'All our work is anti-oppression work, so why wouldn't we find the oppression of women who feel they are trapped in the wrong body equally important'" (Elliot, 28). This quote from Glattstein gets at one of the root problems in anti-trans feminism. That is, that by excluding trans people and not accepting their claims to legitimacy, anti-trans feminists are upholding the social hierarchy that oppresses both trans people and women, therefore working against their own agenda. By embracing trans people, the feminist movement can continue forward as an anti-oppression organization that seeks out equal rights for all, and the trans community can benefit from the backed support of feminists worldwide.

When it comes to transfeminism, the case of Kimberly Nixon is so significant because it highlights a flaw made through the use of outdated, radical, feminist ideologies. Had this error not been made, the Vancouver Rape Relief center would likely have benefited from the diverse perspective of a transwomen like Nixon. If prejudices against trans people were to be taken out of the feminist movement, flaws like this wouldn't happen and feminism could progress as a unified and intersectional front.

“Transgender Legal Advocacy: What Do Feminist Legal Theories Have to Offer?”, written by Demoya Gordon, examines how feminist legal theories could be used to fix the lack of protection for trans people under Title VII. One of the many issues that Title VII works to protect against sex discrimination in the workplace (Gordon, 7). However, as seen on numerous instances, courts have commonly taken the position that trans individuals are not protected against workplace discrimination due to the definition of sex under Title VII because “the plain meaning of the word ‘sex’ does not include transgender status or identity” (Gordon, 9). Claims that wield this much ignorance are wildly frustrating and leave the trans community at a major disadvantage inside and outside the courtroom.

An early instance of this can be seen in *Holloway v. Arthur Andersen & Co* from 1977. This case consisted of a plaintiff that had accused her former employer of firing her because of her decision to undergo male-to-female sex reassignment surgery. Ultimately, the plaintiff’s claim was rejected due to the court “finding that the word ‘sex’ is to be given its traditional definition, rather than an expansive interpretation” (Gordon, 10). Gordon doesn’t accept this justification however, and rebuts this ignorant excuse for discrimination by turning to various feminist legal theories. Feminist legal theorists such as Emi Koyama, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and Christine Littleton all assert that “effective advocacy on behalf of trans persons requires challenging both the construction of gender and expectation that biology and gender expression will line up in normative ways” (Gordon, 38). By changing these expectations, especially in the courts, the claims of trans people undergoing discrimination in the workplace would be further legitimized because sex would no longer be given its “traditional definition”.

A common rebuttal to the “traditional definition” argument is that sex and gender are produced through daily routine and repetition. Queer feminist, Katherine Franke, puts it best by

saying, “sex and gender are constituted and legitimated by way of daily performance rather than merely inhabited as preexisting truths” (Gordon, 39). If one is following this rationalization, it is easy to see that sex and gender are not a priori. In other words, they are not known without experience. Therefore, the law must grant that “sex” under Title VII refers to an individual’s identified gender, something they have complete agency over.

Gordon concludes that feminist legal theory has lots to offer the trans community as the anti-oppression goals of feminism perfectly align with the legal obstacles that face trans people. If feminism as a whole were to integrate the trans community into their efforts and develop a transfeminist stance, they could employ the tools that feminist legal theories, such as the ones presented earlier, offer to develop a legal strategy to counter the apparent oppression that trans people face before the law. Moreover, by doing this, transfeminism would be taking the next step in dissolving the social hierarchy that has prevented marginalized communities from achieving true equality, and the trans community would be further legitimized.

At this point, it is easy to see that resolving the differences between the trans and feminist communities is no simple feat. Whether trans individuals are looking for acceptance into feminist spaces, such as online forums like the F-Word and physical spaces like the Women’s Rise march, or want to join women’s organizations, such as Rape Relief, adversity faces them at every turn. This isn’t to say that there aren’t plenty of feminists who welcome the idea of integrating the trans community into the feminist movement. Transfeminist activists such as Joshua Goldberg, Kimberly Nixon, Lynette Dubois, and numerous others not named in this paper have served the trans community by speaking out against the injustices trans people face in society. Although activists like these have done an exceptional job of organizing against oppression, the trans community still faces many obstacles ahead of them. Cue the feminist movement. Taking

into consideration the anti-oppression platform of both groups, it is clear to see how they could benefit from one another. The trans community can benefit from feminist legal theories such as those presented by Demoya Gordon, and the feminist community can benefit from the added insight that trans activists provide to feminist strategies. From here, there is only one conclusion worth coming to and that is: in order to dissolve the social hierarchy that has marginalized and oppressed women from all different backgrounds, the feminist movement must accept and integrate the trans community into their efforts and adopt a new form of feminism, transfeminism.

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